ANYBODY LISTENING?
Mark 7:31-37
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It was my grandfather's custom for many years to invite several of his friends to his home after church on Sunday evening for a little gentlemanly conversation, a cigar and a whiskey. Among those who came weekly was the Presbyterian clergyman who was his minister. No one ever knew for certain what he did when it came time for the whiskey. The fact that he was there regularly was enough to keep the story alive in our family across the years. The important part of the story as it was told to me, however, was the condition my grandfather attached to the invitation to attend. Good conversation was the object but two topics were absolutely forbidden, religion and politics. I spent the first forty years of my life thinking that his prohibition was ill-chosen, superficial and somewhat boring. How, I have always thought, is it possible to have a significant, or even lively discussion, and eliminate the two topics about which people feel most deeply?

In the recent past I have seen the light and changed my mind. My grandfather was correct. When the topic is either religion or politics what happens between people is rarely conversation: it is instead speech making, position taking at best; at its more basic - it is conflict, sometimes all-out war.

The late Phyllis McGinley wrote a delightful poem about two very strong-headed churchmen at the time of the Reformation: Huldrich Zwingli - who championed the cause of "sprinkling" in baptism, and a man by the name of Muntzer, who advocated "dunking":

HOW TO START A WAR

Said Zwingli to Muntzer,
"I'll have to be blunt, sir.
I don't like your version
Of Total Immersion.
And since God's on my side
And I'm on the dry side,
You'd better swing ovah
To me and Jehovah."

Cried Muntzer, "It's schism,
Is Infant Baptism!
Since I've had a sign, sir,
That God's will is mine, sir,
Let all men agree
With Jehovah and me,
Or go to Hell, singly,"
Said Muntzer to Zwingly,

As each drew his sword.
On the side of the Lord. (Times Three).

I don't recall, frankly, anybody ever changing positions because of some theological insight I shared in a heated argument about religion. Nor do I recall any mutual give and take when the topic was politics. I conclude that one's convictions in these areas are formed somewhere else and when they emerge in conversation it is almost always in the form of an edict, a pronouncement, an eternal truth. During an election, for instance, I find that most people simply cannot accept with grace and charity the fact that others with equal intelligence, equal information

and equal love for the country, could vote for the other candidate.

In short, nobody's listening much. They never were. They never will - unless the Kingdom of God comes and that's why we're here and that's what this sermon is about.

Jesus healed a man once who was deaf and had a speech impediment. The incident interests New Testament scholars for several reasons: it is mentioned only in Mark, the first Gospel account to be written. Jesus, in the act of healing itself, uses two folk remedies employed by other healers of the day. He placed His fingers in the deaf man's ears and touched the man's tongue with His own saliva. One of the references I checked notes that "psychosomatic deafness and aphonia occurring simultaneously have been reported in medical literature." (Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, vol. I, p. 852). That's for those who need empirical explanations for instances of healing. What interests me about the story is the description of the crowd's reaction which Mark adds at the end: "they were astonished beyond measure, saying, 'He has done all things well; He even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak'." That is a direct parallel of a prediction made in the Old Testament. The restoration of hearing - the ability to hear - is one of the characteristics of the day of the Lord. The prophet Isaiah, writing about that great future hope wrote,

> "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
> and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
> then shall the lame man leap like a hart,
> and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy." (Isaiah 35:5,6).

That's a particularly beautiful vision of God's gentle, loving, restoring will for His creation. And the author of the Gospel of Mark is suggesting, with poetic skill and subtlety - that the promised Kingdom is now beginning. God's Kingdom is starting to break into the life of the world. One of its signs is that people are beginning to hear. May I suggest that the meaning is contemporary: God's Kingdom breaks in, God's will is done, when we are able to hear, when we are given the special gift of hearing, when we use it by beginning to listen?

The ability to communicate is essential to our humanity. "No man is an island," John Donne wrote several centuries ago. We are related: we are part of one another. The Trappist Monk Thomas Morton picked up the phrase and wrote a beautiful little book under the same title in which he proposed that our most vital humanity is realized in relationship with other people. He wrote: "Love can only be kept by being given away, and it can only be given perfectly when it is also received." (p.20).

But it was Episcopal priest and theologian Reuel Howe who said it best. The Miracle of Dialogue he called it in a book published in 1963. The person emerges in relationship, Howe taught. The human person does not exist in a vacuum, in aloneness, but is called into being by others: initially by a mother and father, then by significant adults, peers, friends, lovers, companions. We exist as persons only in the matrix of relationships. We were created for one another, for community. Relationships depend on dialogue and dialogue depends on listening: allowing the other person to be by accepting and hearing and responding to what he or she is saying.

If that is true, and I believe it is, the reverse is also true. The person retreats and ultimately ceases to be when dialogue stops. You have had the experience,

I am sure, of talking with someone and knowing, as you were speaking that the other wasn't hearing, in fact wasn't even listening. Instead, he or she, was looking past you or through you, backing away, or at least angling to interrupt with a pronouncement on a different subject. You have, I am sure, felt the frustration and humiliation of that common human experience. It is a non-violent assault on your personhood. It says that you don't matter, don't count, in fact, for the purposes of the other person - you don't even exist.

If God's will is that we listen: If His Kingdom comes as we hear, it might be worth while to look a bit further and ask about and identify some of the problems we have in hearing. A logical one is that people use unclear language. We can't hear sometimes because the person talking can't speak - or write. The National Council of Teachers of English Committee on Public Double-speak, blames television and advertising for corrupting the language and observes that newspapers, Government and Education are not without guilt. A "combat emplacement evacuator" is what the Pentagon once tried to call a shovel.

But more often other things get in the way: like stereotypes, images and expectations. Said the Southern Baptist preacher to the Roman Catholic Monsignor, "I can't hear you because of what I expect you to say." The same dynamic is repeated between teacher and student, parent and child, labor and management, husband and wife.

Sometimes - many times - dialogue doesn't happen because two parties are really engaging in monologue. "I've told him a hundred times how I feel about that" means that dialogue hasn't happened. Someone didn't hear. "Whatever Happened to Dialogue?" Hugh T. Kerr asked in an essay several years ago. He observed: "Conversation, dialogue, rational discourse...are all becoming increasingly difficult." He illustrated by citing the continuing practice of radical student groups - in the name of freedom - simply shouting down speakers with whom they disagree. Kerr's analysis: "The failure to communicate is not a 'problem of communication' as if it could be solved by discovering better media. We have more media than we know what to do with. Our problem is that so many of us don't want to communicate in the first place, partly because we have nothing to say to each other, and partly because everybody seems so mad..." (Our Life In God's Light, p.137).

One of the fundamental problems with communication is that most of us don't listen very well when the subject is something about which we have strong feelings. Swiss physician and theologian, Paul Tournier, in a new book about violence writes, "a person who throws himself heart and soul into an enterprise he believes to be just and holy is not inclined to negotiate but rather to use violence for fear of betraying his ideal..." (The Violence Within, p.28). That's why, by the way, it is so difficult to talk about politics or religion. To listen openly somehow feels like betrayal. It is also why zealous proponents of this religion or that - from the Moonies to the traveling carnival on the State House lawn last week - are not simply offensive, but potentially dangerous. Jonestown should have taught us something about that. Tournier observes: "The worst thing is not being wrong, but being sure one is not wrong. Nothing is more dangerous for us than to believe ourselves to be the authentic interpreters of the divine will. This is the source of all brutal intolerance...and fanaticism." (ibid., p.29).

The saddest thing of all is that the ability to listen, to hear, to engage in dialogue seems to exist in inverse proportion to the passion and commitment you feel about your religion. The more pious the more pontifical. The most devout people

I know don't discuss, they pronounce - ex cathedra - infallibly. That's so sad because the way of Jesus is the very opposite. He gave the gift of hearing, listening. It is God's will, not that we squeeze our little bit of truth in our clenched fists, but that we learn - from His Son - to open hands and arms to one another.

It begins as we learn to listen, first to ourselves. We have trouble at this most basic level, many of us. We don't trust and don't listen to ourselves, our own intuitions and conclusions. We yield, rather, to the external voice of authority which tells us what is true and how we should feel and how to behave. The miracle of dialogue begins when we learn to listen to ourselves, to trust ourselves a little more.

It proceeds as we assume the responsibility of hearing others. It is not easy nor simple. There are many barriers. Counselors learn something called "active listening". That is to say, there is more involved than simple auditing and processing information. A human being is trying to make contact and many times the topic of discussion or the words being used have very little to do with what is really transpiring. For instance, tortured discussions between fathers and college sons are often full of subtle and hidden content. The words may have to do with the oppressiveness of the free enterprise system, the ultimate importance of getting a haircut, or the injustice of drug laws: there may be many words and much conviction. But more often than not what is transpiring has more to do with the end of adolescence, the beginning of manhood, the pain of growing and becoming - on the one hand, and on the other, the poignancy of middle age, fear, threat and the loss of manhood.

Active listening tries to discover the full content and responds to that. Husband and wife may be engaged in heated verbal battle - or silent sulking - about some minor relational mishap. The miracle of dialogue will happen when one of them hears what really is being said, and responds to that.

The church, the extension of all of us, what's good and interesting and faithful about us, and also what's not so hot about us - the church too is called to active listening. In mission the church has engaged in monologue. In other lands it has assumed it knew what was best for indigenous people. It told them how to believe and how to live and it dictated a Christian life style which was far more American than Christian. We continue, sometimes, our arrogant pontificating. "Christ is the answer" someone scrawled in bold letters on the subway wall, and someone wrote under it "I forgot the question".

That's exactly what's going on in our culture today. The questions sound like this: Will life be possible in this ecosystem much longer? Why should we get married instead of living together? If you don't want the child in your womb shall you get an abortion? Can homosexuzls teach school or preach the Gospel? Shall we build bombs or plant grain? It's a noisy, unpleasant, clamoring, disturbing agenda. And there is a lot of religion which chooses deliberately not to hear: in fact, to suggest that Jesus doesn't want us to hear: that His answer is a set of ear plugs. We know that Jesus Christ is the answer to our deepest needs. We know that He is "the way, the truth and the life". But what we know will remain totally irrelevant until we listen, and hear the questions the world is asking, and enter into honest dialogue around each one of them.

Anybody listening? To self? To others? To the world? Anybody listening to God? In the final analysis that's why Jesus healed the deaf man: so he could hear God. Tournier testifies that his life long discipline of inquiring after the will of God, listening for God's word, has been the most productive and creative influence in his life. His advice includes the warning that "God's guidance is strictly personal. It is for each of us to receive and for no one else. I can never know what God is expecting of someone else," and that it comes unexpectedly and not always in a form that is recognizable. (Op.cit. p.29).

The Bible is full of occasions of God speaking and people not hearing. It requires discipline, love, hope and the expectation that God, in fact, does address us. Public worship, we believe, is a conversation between God and His church, His people. In the best sense, that is what prayer is, as well: not monologue but dialogue; listening for what God has to say.

Our faith is that God has something to say to us, as we gather as church, but also personally, as individuals. Our faith is that God's clearest word was spoken in the life and death and resurrection of the man we know as Lord, Jesus Christ. Plenty of people didn't hear that word because they weren't listening. In Jesus Christ God calls us to exercise the gracious gift of hearing. His will is the miracle of dialogue - with one another and with Him.

"He has done all things well: He even makes
the deaf hear and the dumb speak."

Amen.

Father, in the middle of the noisy world, speak Your word to us. Break down the barriers we have built: give us courage to be honest and open in our relationships. Give us the grace to seek Your will in all things and give us today Your good gift of hearing: through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.